co-chaired by the Commerce Secretary and the Secretary General of the ministry of International Trade and Industry of the Government of Malaysia, is being held on 2-3 March, 2005 in New Delhi.

Improvement in relations with Pakistan

353. SHRI GIREESH KUMAR SANGHI: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the status of the ties with Pakistan in varied fields.

(b) whether there has been improvement in the overall relations with Pakistan for the past two years;

(c) if so, the details thereof; and

(d) if not, the reasons therefor?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) to (d) Significant developments have taken place in India-Pakistan relations since April 2003. Relation have been restored at the level of High Commissioners, transport and communication links have resumed, one round of Composite Dialogue has been completed; a series of technical level and Composite Dialogue related meetings have been held on schedule. Another round has been initiated during the Foreign Secretary level talks in December 2004. It has been decided to hold the technical level meetings in the current round by July 2005, and the meetings on the other six subjects under the Composite Dialogue, between April and June 2005.

* People to people exchanges are taking place across the spectrum in large numbers. There has been a resumption of visits by pilgrim groups. Our High Commission is issuing close to 7,000 visas per month.

* The visit of the Chief Election Commissioner of Pakistan in November and Speaker of the National Assembly in December 2004 marked a new beginning in strengthening contacts between the institutions of democracy in the two countries.

* The ceasefire, being observed along the International Border, the LOC, and the AGPL in Siachen, with the exception of two incidents, has held for more than a year.

* The bilateral process has been given impetus through maintenance of high level contracts. The meeting between Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and President Musharraf in New York in September 2004 was followed by the visit of Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz to New Delhi on November 23-24, 2004. February 2005 saw a bilateral visit by an Indian EAM to Pakistan after a gap of almost 16 years.

* During the External Affairs Minister, Shri K. Natwar Singh's visit from 15-17 February, 2005, agreements were reached to start bus services between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, and between Lahore and Amritsar, including to religious places such as Nankana Sahib. Pakistan also agreed to work towards early restoration of the Khokrapar-Munabao rail link. These would further enhance people to people contacts, which have also provided palpable support to the present process.

* It was also decided that agreements would be concluded in the coming months on Pre-notification of Missile Tests, and between Coast Guards and Pakistan's Maritime Security Agency, as well as between the narcotics control authorities of the two countries. Discussions would begin on Agreements on Preventing Incidents at Sea, and Reducing the Risk of Nuclear Accident or Unauthorised use of Nuclear Weapons.

* Progress has been made in meetings on conventional and nuclear CBMs, and a Joint Survey of the boundary pillars in the International Boundary in the Sir Creek has also been successfully concluded in January 2005.

* Significant progress has been achieved on the humanitarian issue of fishermen and civilian detenues. During the Foreign Secretary level talks in December 2004, it was inter-alia agreed that:

- Immediate notification would be provided to the respective High Commissions through the Foreign Ministries of arrested Pakistani/Indian nationals;
- Consular access would be provided within three months of apprehension;
- Repatriation would be done immediately after completion of sentence and nationality verification;
- A mechanism would be introduced for early repatriation, without sentencing of inadvertent crossers;
- A similar mechanism would be established for early release, without sentencing of those under 16 apprehended by either side.

Following the visit, Pakistan has provided consular access to approximately 100 civilian prisoners and 650 fishermen in January and February 2005. The process of release and repatriation would follow confirmation of nationality and completion of sentence.

* Thus meaningful progress has been achieved and the Government intends to continue with the present process of building confidence, enhancing cooperation and dialogue in an atmosphere free from terrorism and violence. Government have made it clear that the process is critically dependent on the fulfillment of January 6, 2004 commitment of President Musharraf not to permit any territory under Pakistan's Control to be used to support terrorism in any manner.

General amnesty to Indians Overstaying in Oman

354. SHRI N.K. PREMACHANDRAN: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Government of Oman declared general amnesty for overstayal people and if so, the number of such Keralites who are willing to return from that country;

(b) whether the Oman Government constituted a High power committee to look into the affairs of non-payment of wages of labourers;